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THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BELVIDERE, ILLINOIS, 1839-1918.

BY MARGARET C. KIRK.

The church in Belvidere is the only Presbyterian church in Boone County.

The first settlement of what is now Boone County by representatives of the Anglo-Saxons, was in the spring of 1835, seven and one-half years after the first Presbyterian Synod of Illinois was organized.

On the unbroken prairie, a band of Pottawattomie Indians had their council ground as well as burial place for their dead. They viewed with regret and sadness the arrival of the white emigrants and in August held their last council and dance beside their beloved Kishwaukee and departed for a new home.

The missionary of the Cross has always been a pioneer and before the expiration of the year religious services were held in the log cabins of the early settlers. Rev. John S. King, a Baptist, preached the first sermon in the spring of 1836. July 24 a church of that denomination was organized. Rev. Breech, a Presbyterian, preached the second sermon and Mr. Pillsbury, a Methodist, the third. Thus we see that of the denominations that have ever been prominent here, each had an early advocate, the Baptist predominating.

Previous to and during the year 1838 a few families of Presbyterians and Congregationalists arrived. They had left Christian privileges in the East and during the winter held frequent meetings in the log cabin of Stephen Burnett. Here was planted, in those early days, by pioneers of Presbyterian faith, the germ which grew into a strong and influential church, the second in the community.

The people were generally poor. When the question of church organization was agitated, some preferred Congregational. Deacon May, a firm Presbyterian and possessed of more worldly goods, said it must be Presbyterian and so it

was organized March 17, 1839, with twenty-four members, eight men and sixteen women. Mrs. Mary Du Bois was the mother of Fred Du Bois, our senior deacon, and through mother and son we have a direct connecting link with the past.

This was the second Presbyterian church organized within the bounds of Freeport Presbytery. For fifteen months home services were continued and then meetings were held in a hall, over a new store, until June 23, 1841. On that date the Presbytery of Ottawa, which then embraced this territory, met here, received the First Presbyterian Church of Belvidere upon its roll and installed the first pastor, Rev. Nathaniel Wright, with a promised salary of four hundred dollars. One hundred and fifty dollars of this was received from the American Home Missionary Society and continued for four years; one hundred dollars the fifth year, fifty dollars the sixth year, making seven hundred and fifty dollars in all received from missionary funds.

At this time there were 275 inhabitants of the village and the church membership was thirty-two.

July 26, 1842, the lot, on which the present church building stands, was purchased and the contract let for the erection of a "brick meeting-house" 36 by 48 feet at a cost of \$2,250. This was the first edifice in Boone County erected and used exclusively for religious worship and was formally dedicated in August, 1843. The church outgrew this building. It was taken down in March, 1857, an adjoining lot purchased and a new building erected with a seating capacity of 800, at a cost of \$17,200.

In January and February, 1865, this church was blest with a religious awakening and revival, conducted by its young pastor, David R. Eddy, as a result of which sixty-seven persons, mostly adults, were received into the church. This church has not been a fruitful mother of living, prosperous churches. There have been two attempts at a separate existence, but both were of short duration. The outgoing was of the two extreme factions produced by the anti-slavery agitation. In 1853 a Congregational Church was organized by those who were dissatisfied because this church would not give expression, by resolution or otherwise, of opinion condemnatory of the tolerance and extension of American

slavery. They built a small church and maintained services for three years, when their meetings were discontinued and some of them returned to the mother church. In 1856 the pressure became so great that resolutions were introduced and passed protesting against the further extension of slavery and withholding Christian fellowship from those who justify or uphold it. In 1857 a few members, who claimed dissatisfaction on account of these resolutions, were granted letters of dismissal, at their request, for the purpose of organizing a second Presbyterian church. They also disbanded after a few years, some returning to the mother church.

Only one child from this church became an ordained minister of the Presbyterian church. One other entered the Baptist ministry.

The growth of the church was rapid in the days of its early history. In 1850 there were 157 communicants. In 1870, 396.

The fifteen years from 1864 to 1879 (the pastorates of David R. Eddy and Thomas Chalmers Easton) were the years of largest membership and church attendance, the largest being 420 in 1872, when Rev. Eddy resigned his pastorate.

In March, 1889, the church celebrated during three days, the semi-centennial of its organization. Both of these beloved former pastors were present and had a part on the program.

The installation of a new pastor, John Clark Hill, was a feature of the celebration. To his executive ability was largely due the raising of \$10,000 in 1890, with which the church was remodelled into practically the church of today.

The church membership at that time was three hundred.

In March, 1914, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the church organization was celebrated. Not a person who was present at the founding of the church was present at this celebration. The church has had fourteen pastors.

In the Civil war our church was not lacking when the call came. She gave her noble sons, she gave money, she gave her prayers, and forth from the basement of the old church went the men, who signed the muster roll, to battle for the flag of their country. In those same rooms the women scraped lint and rolled bandages in the anxious days which followed.

No records have been preserved of the amounts contributed to benevolence and charity. From the first the spirit

and action of the members of the church and congregation have been to contribute not only to the regular boards of the church but to all worthy causes.

Through the years the cause of temperance has had the indorsement and support of the church membership. The local W. C. T. U. records bear the names of many of our women who consecrated their time and energy to the furthering of its work.

The first monthly concert for missions was observed July 6, 1840, two men (Col. Walker and David Caswell) being present. This is worthy of note, as about the same time the women met for the same object, their organization being called a "female prayer-meeting."

In 1873, during Rev. Easton's pastorate, the foreign missionary society was organized and in 1874 the home missionary society. In December, 1899, a permanent union of the two societies was brought about through the influence of the pastor and his wife, Rev. and Mrs. George R. Pierce, and the name became "The Woman's Missionary Society." Then began the systematic study of missions at home and in foreign lands and systematic giving in connection with our Presbyterian Society.

The Sunday school was organized June 6, 1840, with twenty-five pupils and three teachers. No records of attendance were preserved until 1865, when there were 225 members. The largest membership corresponds to that of the church, during the pastorates of D. R. Eddy and T. C. Easton, reaching 425.

In 1900 there were 230 enrolled. In this Sunday school record, honorable mention should be made of Deacon H. W. Avery. He was first elected superintendent in 1846 and had the distinction of holding that office for forty years, although not continuously. He also established and sustained Sabbath schools in the different school houses throughout the county. He had wide acquaintance with prominent Sunday school workers, because of his activity in, and generosity to the work, and was honored by being named delegate to the World's Sunday School Convention, held in Jerusalem in April, 1904, being represented at that gathering by his grandson. Always interested in young men, in 1902 he gave twenty thousand dollars to build our local Y. M. C. A.

In 1905 the young pastor, B. L. Brittin, with much painstaking labor, revised the roll of our church membership. Ninety names, constituting what was called "dead timber", were dropped from the roll. In 1910 membership was 260, with Sunday school sustaining its average of over 200. In 1918 church membership 300 and Sunday school enrollment 160.

The primary and intermediate comprise the greater number, the falling off being the youth and adults.

In the present World's War the church is doing her bit cheerfully and loyally. Again she has given of her sons, her money and her prayers. A class for the making of surgical dressings meets weekly in the same basement rooms used during the Civil war.

The Boone County Chapter of the Red Cross is largely officered and its work efficiently superintended in all departments by those from the membership of the church and congregation.

As to the outlook for the future it is difficult to conjecture. Financial obligations are always fulfilled but the tendency of the times is away from the church and participation in its activities does not seem to be considered an obligation of membership.

At the time of the semi-centennial, the historian writes: "The founders of this organization, and those following through many succeeding years, were faithful to the tasks imposed upon them in their day and generation."

Conditions are different today and the war is making them more complex. Success or failure will be determined by the measure in which the present task is recognized and undertaken, not by the few, but the church as a whole, and performed in the same spirit as that of "ye olden time."